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LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE TEACHING OF THE NOVEL.

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CONTEMPORARY NOVELS CAN BE USED EFFECTIVELY BY TEACHERS IN THE CLASSROOM. JOHN KNOWLES' "A SEPARATE PEACE," FOR EXAMPLE, LENDS ITSELF TO DIFFERENT KINDS OF LITERARY CRITICISM. AN ARCHETYPAL INTERPRETATION OF KNOWLES' THEMATIC PURPOSE REVEALS THAT THE NOVEL IS BASED ON TWO MYTHS--THE INITIATION OF INNOCENCE INTO EXPERIENCE AND THE SACRIFICE OF THE PURE AND INNOCENT FOR THE WELFARE OF ANOTHER. TO STRENGTHEN THESE TWO MYTHIC THEMES, MOTIFS OCCUR THROUGHOUT THE NOVEL--FOR EXAMPLE, THE COLOR PINK SYMBOLIZES BOTH SACRIFICE AND INNOCENCE, THE FOUR SEASONS PROGRESS IN THE COURSE OF THE NOVEL FROM A SUMMER OF INNOCENCE TO A SPRING OF RENEWAL, THE WAR INTRODUCES THE IMPLICATION OF EVIL, AND THE QUALITY OF FEAR MAKES EVERY CHARACTER CORRUPTIBLE EXCEPT FINNY, WHO IS WITHOUT FEAR. FOCUSING ON THE MIND AND ART OF THE WRITER, A TRADITIONAL CRITICAL APPROACH INVOLVES A STUDY OF THE AUTHOR, OF THE PLOT STRUCTURE AND THEME OF THE LITERARY WORK, AND OF THE INTERACTION AND DIFFERENCES OF CHARACTERS. THIS ARTICLE, A REPORT OF A PANEL DISCUSSION HELD AT THE KANSAS ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON COMPOSITION AND LITERATURE IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE, APPEARED IN "THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS BULLETIN OF EDUCATION," VOL. 21, NO. 3, MAY 1967. (JB)

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Literary Criticism and the Teaching of the Novel

The members of the panel concerned with literary criticism and the teaching of the novel were Thressa Newell, Shawnee Mission North High School; Jackie L. Estes, Arkansas City High School; and Betty M. Nelick, Assistant Professor of English, Ottawa University. James A. Gowen, Assistant Professor of English, the University of Kansas, served as moderator of the panel.[1]

As the moderator of the panel, Mr. Gowen stated that the choice of a novel as the focal point of the panel and more particularly the choice of *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles stems from the fact that the novel is a genre which makes up a large body of literature, the novel is conducive to a formal study, and a novel of recent vintage is seldom used by teachers in the classroom. The problems relevant to the study of a recent novel are the lack of criticism which permit the use of old and standard techniques for textual interpretation and the inability to ascertain the greatness of the novel. The teacher of an established novel tends to make the subject of the study either the fame or the personal awe of the work. The purpose of the panel, then, was to show teachers how a recent novel, *A Separate Peace,* or any other novel, could be prepared for classroom use.

Miss Newell began the panel with an archetypal interpretation of *A Separate Peace*. She believes that the novel is based on two myths: the initiation of innocence into experience imbedding the Adamic myth and the sacrifice of the pure and innocent for the welfare of another.

Devon, an Eastern preparatory school, represents the Garden of Eden. The two boys, Gene and Phineas (called Finny), are freed from the restrictions of society by an indulgent summer faculty and the absence of family or social background. In this New Eden, the boys re-enact the Adamic myth. Forming a strong friendship, the boys systematically break the remaining rules at Devon. They jump from a forbidden tree into the Devon River, wrestle on a lawn, and spend a night on an ocean beach. However, their friendship is marred by Gene's envy of Phineas, who looms larger than life. He is given to strong loyalties to his fellow man, nature, and God. Gene's envy includes Finny's good will and his incorruptibility. Finally, from the tree near the Devon River, Gene becomes the heir to the Adamic curse. Gene causes Finny's fall from the tree and then Gene follows Finny's fall with his own fall into the river. Finny's fall evidently causes his death. Gene's fall is from innocence to knowledge—the knowledge of the perversity of his own nature and their common loss of Eden.

When Finny returns to Devon late in the winter semester, the second mythical pattern emerges. This pattern is associated with rituals of primitive tribes such as the myths of Dionysus and Osiris, or in ancient European festi-

1. The complete papers presented by the panelists may be read in *Bulletin of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English*, Series LII, No. 3, February 1967, pp. 3-7, 12-16, 19-22.

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vals. In a more familiar form, the Christian story of the crucifixion demonstrates the universitality of a myth that a god becomes a man and is sacrificed. In mythology, when this sacrifice occurs, the god's spirit imbibes his successor so that the well-being of the tribe is assured. Finally, the god is offered in communion to his followers as a source of strength and vitality.

Phineas and Gene enact the broad principles of the myth in the latter parts of the novel. Phineas has the attributes of a god. His name is associated with the meanings of friendship and priesthood. After the accident, Finny becomes the redemptive god and returns to Devon to infuse Gene with his own spirit.

In the spring, Phineas celebrates his returning vitality with a winter carnival. The Winter Carnival in pagan festivals celebrated the coming of spring and the return to life. When Phineas accidentally rebreaks the leg, the scapegoat theme is complete. Phineas is sacrificed and with the sacrifice Gene's fury and envy are gone. Thus, the novel can be seen as a reenactment of the fall of man, whose source in that fall is an inherent evil.

The exponents in *A Separate Peace* strengthen the mythic themes, according to Mrs. Estes. Exponents may be called "recurring motifs." An important exponent that runs throughout the novel is fear—"the special fear that exists in every human—his particular individual weakness that makes him corruptible." All of the characters within the novel have some kind of fear: Gene fears his position with Phineas. Brinker combats his fear of the war by developing his resentment toward it. Mr. Ludsbury, the headmaster, hides his fear of the world situation by assuming an air of aloofness. The only character without fear is Phineas—the archetypal figure of a god-man.

An important exponent is Finny's pink shirt, which is his symbol for war. The color pink, a mixture of red and white, symbolizes sacrifice and innocence—two characteristics of Finny's role in both myths. In the Adamic myth, a god is betrayed by man. But Gene, the archetype of Adam, ruins an Edenic Garden. The Devon garden is surrounded by two rivers: the fresh and pure Devon symbolizes cleansing power and a pure, innocent world; the Naguamsett, filled with "marsh, mud, and seaweed," symbolizes a world of imperfection and perversity. In the early section of the book, Gene is searching for the tree from which Phineas fell. The tree for Gene is a tree of knowledge similar to the tree in the Garden of Eden. This tree becomes the chief exponent of the Adamic myth.

The war with its larger implications of evil permeates the school at the opening of the winter term. It is in this bleak and cold world that Gene becomes aware of the cruelty of war and man's inhumanity to man.

Exponents of sacrifice are suggested in the sheepskin collar Finny wears and in the trial which may be compared to the trial of Christ. "The first building is symbolic of the sacrificial altar." The building's marble, the motto of the frieze, and the steps are similar to those of an ancient temple.

The four seasons are the last exponents which strengthen the mythic themes. The beginning of the novel is in summer, a time of bliss and carefree innocence and the Edenic state at Devon. The winter season brings on the snow as "The Spring brings the renewed life and 'Gene's acceptance of Finny's life' or 'the acceptance of man by a god.' "

In contrast to mythological and exponential approaches, Professor Nelick prefers more traditional approaches. Her position was that the traditional approaches were the most valid for the secondary grades and introductory college courses. Among the traditional approaches recommended were the study of the author in depth, the themes found in the works of one author, and "the kind of study, resulting in 'the Mind and Art of' kind of literary criticism."

Beginning with a biographical approach, Mrs. Nelick explained that John Knowles attended Phillips Exeter Academy, graduated from Yale, was a reporter on the Hartford *Courant* for two years, and frequently contributed articles to *Holiday*. Critics acclaimed Knowles as "a promising newcomer;" the "awaited successor to J. D. Salinger;" "sensitive without being delicate;" "subtle without being obscure." Publishers of *A Separate Peace* proclaimed that Phillips Exeter was indeed Devon.

In the opening of *A Separate Peace,* the older Gene, a Gene which could be a reminiscing Knowles, revisits his *alma mater*. It is the older Gene who sets the stage for the reader and establishes the historical context of the story in World War II with the mention of such names as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill. The war becomes a determining force in the thought and actions of the characters. The novel is concerned with "Gene's slow and painful dying to the world of adolescence into the world of manhood, through the outward pressures of a world at war and the inward pressure of the realization of fear and evil within himself."

Important to the understanding of the novel is the study of characters' differences and interactions. Finny is the perfect athlete whereas Gene is the imperfect scholar. Another difference in characters is in their reactions to rules. Finny dislikes rules, accepting only those which he makes. Gene has a genuine respect for rules. Finny lives in an unreal world, a world of illusions of his own making. Gene's world is the world of reality; Finny denies reality, the reality of history and the reality of war. In this world of unreality, Finny creates a separate peace. Finny and later "Leper" Lepellier become catalysts in the novel. They with their unreal world force Gene into the real world. Gene alone survives because he is fittest to survive. He alone has a knowledge of himself as imperfect man in imperfect world.

The meaning of the title, *A Separate Peace,* explains the new and separate peace Gene makes with the world—a peace made with his knowledge of the culpability of man after the war. In this, Knowles offers to the reader an alternative to "the bewilderment of Salinger's Holden Caulfield, to the

cynicism of Hemingway's Nick and Frederick; it is John Knowles' Gene Forrester."

With these approaches to *A Separate Peace,* the reader perceives the richness of the work. His appreciation is founded not merely on emotions but understanding and knowledge of the work of art. If the teacher approaches the teaching of a literary work with a critical insight as to the integrity and value of the work, the work may be taught more successfully.

JACK T. LUNDY, *Trego Community High School Reporter*